

**The Story of**  
**John “Jack” Martyn Bricknell**



**1909 – 1943**



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## **Preface**

How do you write a story about your father, whom you last saw in 1941 when you were only 5 years old?

Apart from my memories and the information that I have learned about my father from others, I have only a few physical items that are linked to his memory. These are some photographs and three small wooden elephants from a set of five that he sent me from Malaya when I was a young child.

Of the few memories I have of Dad, perhaps even some of those are probably coloured more by what I have been told about him than accuracy. I know that he was brought up in the Liberal Catholic Church of St Alban in Sydney, but was probably not very religious. I know that he was a warm and caring father from one or two personal incidents that have remained with me. I know that he had skills in carpentry, drawing and playing sport, tennis and swimming at least. I know he was a keen fisherman and had a number of rods for beach and river fishing. I know that he loved owning cars, the Essex, a reasonably late model when he purchased it, was his pride and joy. I know he was tall and reasonably well built, losing his hair and that he always wore glasses. I know that he and mum were members of the Foresters Lodge in Eastwood, a forerunner to a medical and hospital fund. I know that he was well liked by his family members, relatives and those with whom he worked. But that is about all that I can convincingly put down from memories or information that I have received from others.

I can't give a clue as to his personality, because a child can't take in what that means. But I can trace his story from a more or less linear aspect. So this is an attempt to tell his story in that way.

I should add, that two trips undertaken with my brother John and other family members, to Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) have helped a good deal in allowing me to be able to put together the last six or seven months of his life story. This covered the period when as a Prisoner of War he worked on the construction of that dreadful Thailand Burma Railway line that caused his death.

I trust that this booklet will help you understand more about Jack who was a father, uncle and grandfather to those for whom it is written.

Keith Bricknell

June 2010



## **Early Years**

Jack Bricknell was the only son from the second marriage of George Morris Bricknell to Elizabeth Blanche Martin. The marriage took place in the Annandale Methodist Church, Sydney on 20 April 1905. There were four surviving children in the family, Jessie known as "Triss", Ruth, John known as "Jack" and Joan. Jack was born on the 8 August 1909 at the family home in Rose Bay, Sydney NSW.

His father, George Morris Bricknell, the youngest child of John and Maria Bricknell of Adelaide (the family home was in the suburb of Norwood), had previously been married to Kathleen Margaret "Maggie" Kinsala. From that marriage there had been three surviving children, Gordon, Cathleen and Arthur. Maggie died of nephritis on 7 January 1902 in Fremantle Hospital (WA) and was buried, with her unborn child, in the Fremantle Cemetery. Following the death of his wife, George took the children (the oldest was 8 years of age) to Adelaide and left the two boys in the care of his oldest brother, Frederick Bricknell. Cathleen was fostered out to Mrs Isobel Schroeder at Moonta on the Eyre Peninsula of South Australia. Isobel Schroeder's son and sister had been witnesses to George and Maggie's marriage on 30 August 1890. The two boys, Gordon and Arthur eventually came to live with their father after his second marriage. Cathleen lived at Moonta with the Schroeder family until she moved to Adelaide to take up work in her teen years.

The family that Jack Bricknell grew up in consisted of his two half brothers and three sisters. The initial family home was probably in rented premises named "Norwood" after George Morris Bricknell's family home in Adelaide. It was on Old South Head Road, Rose Bay, an eastern suburb of Sydney.

Jack's father, George Morris Bricknell, had grown up in Adelaide and learned his trade as a Pastry cook, working initially in the family business in Adelaide. Bricknell Brothers had an office and outlet in Rundle Street (now the Rundle Mall) and a factory nearby and possibly one or two other branches in that city. They became one of the top bakery and catering companies in the state with tea and functions rooms in the city and a large business supplying their baked goods to country and city clients. They later merged with Balfours; to be known as Balfour Bricknell & Co Ltd. John Bricknell the founder of the business and his eldest son Frederick managed the operation.

George, together with his brothers Frank William and Arthur Charles went to Broken Hill in NSW and set up a bakery and water carrying business. Upon the death of Frank's wife in 1894, they all moved back to Adelaide. Next Frank moved to Perth in 1896 and finally set up business on the Eastern Goldfields of that state in Hannan Street, Kalgoorlie. George and Maggie and their growing family moved to Kalgoorlie with Frank and George became the head pastry cook. Whilst Arthur also moved to Kalgoorlie, it appears that he wasn't involved in the business, but instead got involved in gold prospecting and mining.



Following the death of his wife, Maggie, George having left the children in South Australia moved to New South Wales. From what he told me many years ago, it was at that time that he began to drink very heavily and was "rescued from the gutter" by the Salvation Army. How he met his second wife, is unknown, she was a confectioner and some 12 years his junior. George, by this time, had become an Insurance man, working for Colonial Mutual Life.



The Bricknell Family in Sydney  
Gordon, Elizabeth, Arthur  
Jessie (Triss), John (Jack), Joan on George Morris' knee & Ruth Bricknell



Kathleen as a teenager

They set up house in Rose Bay and then according to family legend, the eldest brother Fred turned up from Adelaide with the children and asked the newly married Elizabeth to take them on as her responsibility. This being the first that she knew there were children from the previous marriage! There may be some truth in the story; however, it is certain that he would have only brought the two boys to meet their new step mother, as Cathleen was that year enrolled and attending the Moonta Public School in rural South Australia. Cathleen's stories as passed down to her daughter indicate that she did not meet her father and step mother and their children until she was a teenager and visited their home in Sydney.



With a growing family and a husband who could not manage money, Elizabeth set out to try and help the family survive. She did this by renting a large place in Bondi as accommodation for the family and letting out the spare rooms to boarders. She would follow this practice of running boarding houses until just after the end of World War 2. She ran boarding houses in the Bondi district, Greenwich and West Ryde.

George's oldest brother, Fred, came to Sydney after he sold the Adelaide business in 1911. Initially Fred set up business as "Excelsior Dining Rooms" in Pyrmont Bridge Road and Paternoster Rowe, Sydney. Then, just prior to the outbreak of the Great War (WW1) he took out a lease on "The Pavilion" at Bondi Beach and set it up as a dining room and bakery. George became the pastry cook and the business, then in the heart of Sydney's weekend and holiday activities, should have been a great success. However, with the onset of the war in 1914, the crowds disappeared, particularly of a weekend and the business failed.

Around this time, George Morris and his eldest son, Gordon were involved in a "butter run" in Bondi, presumably somewhat similar to a "milk run" supplying homes and business with butter each day. In the meantime the boarding house kept a roof over the family and provided some income through its boarders.

According to Joan Bricknell, sometime during World War 1 (1914-18) the family were living in or near the Liverpool Army Camp, south west of Sydney, where she guessed her father was involved in catering and/or cooking for the Army. Then, in 1917, with the encouragement of Elizabeth's sister, Minnie Keir (nee Martyn), the family moved to the far south coast of NSW to live on a farm property, "Woodlands" on the Punkalla Road in Tilba Tilba. Elizabeth Blanche had spent her early years in Central Tilba when her father had been the first Manager of the Mount Dromedary Gold Mining Company. They had leased and lived on "Sherringham" farm, which is still a viable farm property today.

Joan tells of the journey being undertaken by horse and cart with all their goods packed on top and even the dog walking alongside the procession. Instead of finding themselves on a good farming property, they were on what might be described as a "prickle farm", not much good pasture for cattle, some fruit trees, an abundance of blackberries, very rocky soil and an unending population of rabbits! Jack Bricknell was enrolled in the Tilba Tilba Primary school during this period. It was also during this time that George was advised by the Australian Government, that his and Maggie's second son, Arthur, had been killed in action in France. This occurred on 5 April 1918 he was almost 22 years of age, having served in Egypt as well as on the Western Front.

They stayed on the farm for a number of years, but it was not a success and eventually they returned to Sydney.



## **Formative Years**

Perhaps the family moved back to Sydney due to the failure of "Woodlands" developing as a successful venture, or George's inability to be a good farmer, despite his love for animals and the rural life. They started a grocery business in Waverley, but this was not a success due to George's heavy drinking. Elizabeth went back into setting up a boarding house in a rented two story house at 2 Adelaide Street Woollahra. Then they moved to a property in Greenwich on Sydney Harbour. She saw the Greenwich place as a superior boarding house for young people. It was a great success. George returned to the Insurance business and did very well, eventually becoming an Inspector.

It was at Greenwich that the children from George and Elizabeth's marriage grew up with all the benefits and beauties of living on the harbour. Their close friends were the Cavill family, the father, Dick Cavill a former Olympian, managed the local tidal baths. The water beckoned and the children learned to swim, fish, boat and sail on its waters. At sometime Jack was sailing in the Greenwich Flying Squadron's races.

On one occasion they built their own galvanised iron canoe and sailed it out onto the harbour. This disrupted the Ferry Boat service to Greenwich, much to the annoyance of the skipper who had to give way to those "stupid kids in a tin canoe". George Morris, who was on board the ferry, recognised who they were and looked the other way!

Joan tells the story of the kids walking through the under harbour tunnel from Long Nose Point, Balmain to Manns Point in Greenwich. This tunnel had been built between 1913 and 1924 (before the Harbour bridge was built) to carry electric cables for the tram services on the north side of the harbour and was large enough in most parts for 3 people to walk abreast and upright. It was flooded in 1930, although the cables were still used up to 1969.

In the mid 1920s, George was promoted to being a rural Insurance Inspector to be based in Singleton NSW. By this time all of the children except Joan had grown up and were beginning to set out on their careers. "Triss" had commenced Nursing Training at Prince Henry Hospital at Little Bay, one of the southern beaches of Sydney. Ruth began working as a seamstress with her aunt at Sydney Hospital, and then as a colourist for a photographic studio (the days before colour film). She was living at "The Manor" a property owned by the Liberal Catholic Church of St Alban. Joan was still at school and moved to Singleton with her parents, often skipping school to drive her father around his insurance district (she was only about 14 years old at the time). Jack went down the south coast to Tilba Tilba.



## Jack and Sylvia

Tilba Tilba must have been a magnet for Jack. It was the earlier home of Jack's mother when her father and mother, John & Dorothy Martyn (nee Crawford) lived there on "Sherringham" whilst John Martyn managed the nearby Mt Dromedary Gold Mining Company (a 24/7 job according to all records). Then his own parents, George & Elizabeth Bricknell lived on "Woodlands" for a period. His aunt, Minnie Martyn had married John Keir and they owned the "Anglevale" and "Braeside" properties opposite "Woodlands". So in many ways it was not surprising that he should choose to move to Tilba Tilba when his parents left Greenwich for Singleton.

We know little about the details of his life in Tilba Tilba. He boarded with a family in Central Tilba and worked at the Tilba Tilba Cheese Factory. No doubt he picked up on friendships he made when he was a pupil at the local primary school 6 or 7 years earlier. Also being an active young man, he would have been involved in many of the activities that took place in the community. My best guess is that it was during one of these social or sporting occasions, possibly at a dance, that he first met "Sylvia" Sylvania Alberta Riches, who was working on a farming property in the district. She was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the 11 children of Albert Secret and Mary "Dolly" Margaret Riches who were probably living in Bermagui at that time (they purchased "Leighton" in the Tilba District in 1930). Apparently Jack and Sylvia clicked and attraction blossomed into romance and the hopes of marriage.

According to a story by Betty Bate (nee Southam), Jack owned a mare, which he probably used to ride to work and elsewhere. When he left Tilba Tilba, presumably to return to Sydney, he sold the mare, now in foal, to Betty's father, it had two foals which her father named "Brick" and "Nell"!

Unless one owned property or had a trade, there were not many prospects for the future in a place like Tilba, so Sylvia and Jack, now engaged, moved to Sydney, where they hoped to find work and be able to earn enough money to marry. Jack moved in with his parents who by this stage were back in Sydney and running another Boarding House, "Cooleen", one of the historic homes in West Ryde. Sylvia stayed with Alma & Alan O'Neill, her older sister and brother in law, probably in Gladesville until she obtained employment, as a housekeeper in a home in West Parade, Epping.

The Great Depression of 1929/30 struck and Jack found it hard to find work. He tried many ventures; as a diver in Sydney Harbour; in advertising; even growing his own vegetables for sale (but when they were ripe, people stole them!). Only now, following the 2008/10 Global Financial Crisis, can one begin to imagine how difficult and depressing life would have been for the unemployed at that time. Unemployment reached double digit figures very quickly and many families became destitute as they lost their properties and means of an income (no Centrelink Benefits in those days).



One social activity for Jack and his friends came about through the tennis court at his parent's boarding house, "Cooleen". His father was able to buy enough balls, to enable all the young unemployed people in the district to play social tennis free of charge every Saturday afternoon. Jack and Sylvia joined in this activity regularly, which became the social centre for many people in the West Ryde district of Sydney. Whether at this time, or before then it is unsure, but both of them became good social and competition tennis players, a sport they enjoyed and participated in for many years. Sylvia, who was working and enjoying a better income than she could ever have hoped for in Tilba Tilba, told how she would often slip a packet of cigarettes and ten shillings into Jack's pocket on these occasions.

Eventually he obtained a position as a bread carter with the Eastwood Co-operative Society, initially using a horse drawn vehicle, then an International Panel Van. Now, with a secure job and a steady income they could plan on getting married. This they did on 23 December 1932 in the Methodist Church in West Ryde. The reception was at "Cooleen" with George & Elizabeth Bricknell using all their skills as pastry cooks and confectioners to cater for the reception. The newly married couple lived in a flat at "Cooleen".



Jack and Sylvia Bricknell on their wedding day



## **Jack's Family**

As a young married couple, with secure accommodation and a steady income they set a lifestyle which even by today's standards would have been very much "with it". Jack initially had a motorcycle (an "Indian") but now that he was married his eyes were set on buying a motor car. He bought a Studebaker roadster that served them both well, but eventually changed it for a 1930 Essex Super Six Tourer, which was only a few years old. It was his pride and joy. It was to be the last car that he owned. (Those familiar with cars of those days referred to the Essex Super Six as "the gutless wonder"! It was built and marketed by the Hudson Motor Coy which eventually became the American Motor Coy makers of Hudson, Essex, Nash & Rambler cars). They used the car during their annual holidays (usually at Christmas) to travel to Tilba Tilba and spend time with Sylvia's family.

Sylvia soon became pregnant and their first son was born in St Edmunds Hospital, Rutledge Road Eastwood on 14 November 1933. He was named John Crawford Bricknell. One senses that there was a bit of a tussle between Sylvia and her mother in law about the names selected. John was the name of his father and both his paternal great grandfathers. Crawford was the family name of Elizabeth Bricknell's mother, but Jack solved the issue by declaring he would be called "John Crawford" after Australia's then champion tennis player Jack Crawford!

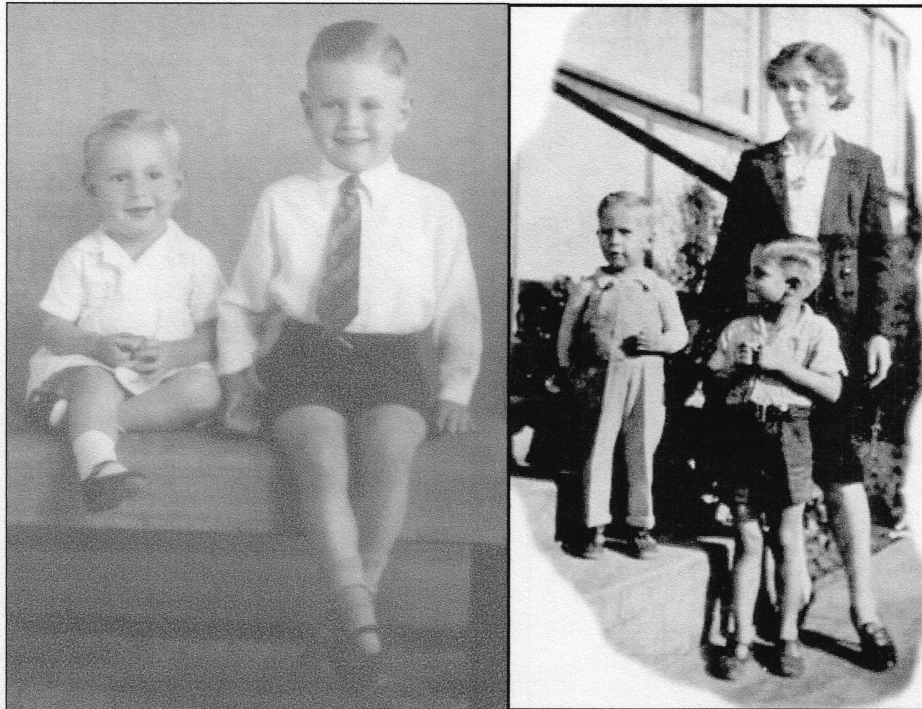
With three in the family and possibly some tensions between Sylvia and her mother in law, they decided to move out on their own. They found and rented a house in Midson Road Epping and settled down there making it their own home. Jack bought a "pool table" and it became the centre piece of the main lounge/living area. On many occasions, their friends came over during the week to play billiards and pool and to socialise. Sylvia joined a local social tennis club nearby.

Their home also became the stopping off point for family and friends from the far south coast of NSW when they came to Sydney. Her father, Albert Riches and two of her brothers, stayed there in 1935 when Sylvia's mother died whilst a patient in Sydney Hospital.

Their second and last child was born at St Edmunds Hospital on 30 March 1936, he was named Keith. Again Sylvia faced off against her in laws who wanted his second name to be "George" after Jack's father. This time there was no compromise and no second name, he was called "Keith" after Keith Smith one of the two brothers (Ross & Keith Smith) who had won the Australian Government prize for the fastest flying time between .England and Australia.

The manager of the Eastwood Co-operative Society, where Jack worked, told him about a deceased estate house that was up for sale. It was located at 20 First Avenue, Eastwood. They were able to borrow money and purchase the home and this has always been regarded as "the family home". It was on a large block (about 20.3 x 54.8 metres) one

which Jack and Sylvia hoped would be big enough to accommodate a tennis court. The house was brick and tile with three bedrooms, lounge, separate dining, breakfast room and a pantry. A verandah ran across the width of the house at the rear, Jack turned part of that into his workshop.

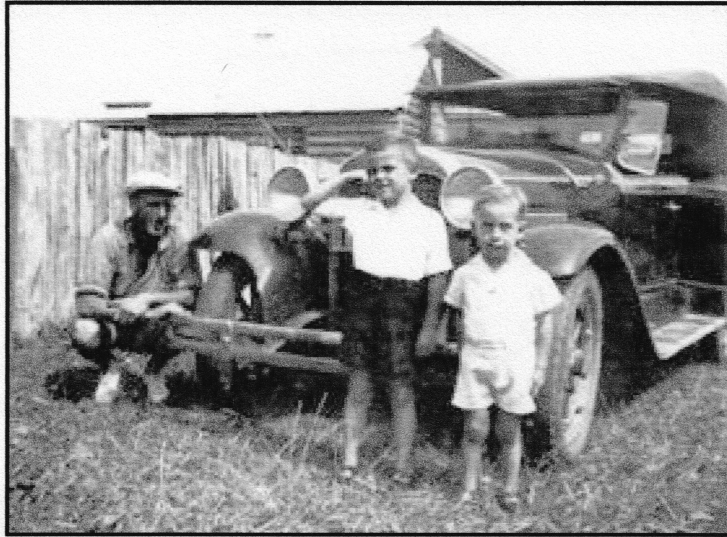


Left - Keith & John about 1938  
Right - Keith, Sylvia & John at Epping

Life changed for them both. Sylvia was a full time housewife looking after two young boys. They spent time and effort in repainting the house, laying paths, building furniture and establishing a garden and chook run. Sylvia's sisters often came and stayed with them. Shortly after moving in (probably about 1939) the house was connected to sewerage and a WC installed on the back verandah. In order to cover these costs, the beloved Essex was sold to Haigh's Garage in Blaxland Road, Eastwood. This was a sad day for both Jack and Sylvia and a mystifying one for John and Keith, who couldn't understand why someone was taking their car away.

Without a car, it was not possible for them to make the annual holiday visits to Sylvia's father at "Leighton" in Tilba Tilba, nor were they free to go on occasional trips in and around Sydney. Now holidays were dependant upon camping trips when Jack could arrange for friends like Jerry Vaughan to drive them to and from the beach for their annual two weeks leave. Instead of the country trips, camping was then done on Newport Beach in Sydney with Jack and Sylvia and the boys indulging in their favourite pastimes of swimming and fishing.





Jack, John & Keith with the beloved Essex  
at "Leighton" (Sylvia's father's property) Tilba Tilba

On one of their camping holidays at Newport they were joined by George & Elizabeth Bricknell, who spotted a house for sale on the main road. They eventually purchased "The Lodge" on Barrenjoey Road, but did not move into it until well after the end of World War 2.

By 1940 Jack and Sylvia had settled into their own home in Eastwood, Their two sons were thriving, John at Eastwood Primary School and Keith due to start the next year. Life for them was looking good. However dark clouds were appearing on the horizon.



## World War 2

Germany had invaded Poland in September 1939 with the result that England, its Empire and Allies went to war. The Allied Forces as they became known consisted of England, France, Belgium, Holland and its colonies, Denmark, Norway, Greece, the countries of the British Empire and eventually Russia and the United States. They were opposed by the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy and Japan. Australia had already committed its 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Army Divisions, its Air Force and Navy to help fight in the European theatre of the war. Further storm clouds arose with the threat of Japan, already at war with China, attacking the European colonies in South East Asia. Two of the three Brigades of the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division were sent to Malaya as part of the defence force for that country.

Both Jack and Sylvia, like most Australians, saw England as the motherland and took seriously the call to serve King, Country & Empire. On 21 June 1940 Jack enlisted in the Army at the Paddington Depot Recruitment Office. The story is told that he was unable to see long distance without his glasses, so he asked his wife's cousin, Len Thomas, who was enlisting at the same time, to memorise the eye chart. Jack then memorised the chart, took off his glasses for the test and passed as being perfectly sighted! These recruits were initially based at the Military Drill Hall at Gladesville built on a converted football ground. They were known as the "day boys" as they slept at home each night and attended parades and training during the day. Next he was moved to Ingleburn Army Camp for basic training and then along with other colleagues to Bathurst for pre-embarkation training.



Jack at Ingleburn Army Training Camp 1940

His unit was the 2/73 Light Aid Attachment (LAD) of the Australian Army Ordnance Corps (AAOC), later to be redesignated as the Australian Electrical & Mechanical Engineers (AEME), with his group being attached to the Signallers. A LAD unit was a mobile workshop unit and usually consisted of an officer (Lieutenant or Captain of the



AAOC) with a Staff Sergeant and 11 Other Ranks, largely qualified tradesmen, drivers, a cook and a batman. They operated a mobile field workshop that could assist the party to whom they were attached. They were usually equipped with 2 light general service vans, a 3 ton breakdown lorry, a 3 ton spare parts lorry and a garage trailer. They carried the normal range of weapons and a light machine gun. His role was that of driver and mechanic for the vehicles of the LAD and the Signals Unit. He eventually was made a Lance Corporal.

For a short period, during his time in Bathurst, Sylvia left the boys in the care of relatives and went down to be with Jack on his local leave. His final leave was in Sydney. Then as a member of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division of the AIF he prepared for embarkation to a destination unknown. They left Sydney on board HMT Queen Mary on 4 February 1941 and sailed for Singapore where they disembarked on 18 February as the Australian Contingent to support the British and Indian Army units set for the defence of Malaya.



L – Jack & Sylvia on final leave in Sydney  
R – L/Cpl J M Bricknell in Malaya

In Malaya they settled into camp and field training for the defence of the colony. Living in a tropical climate and a culture that was vastly different to their own was a new and exciting experience. They had to learn to live, train and work in the hot and humid atmosphere of an equatorial country. The expatriate community opened their hearts, homes and clubs to these Australia soldiers. There were photographs of Jack and his mate Pat Bond attending dinners and other social events when they were off duty.



Jack came down with meningitis and was hospitalised. He recovered and was sent to a hospital in Malacca for recuperation. Upon discharge he was slated to be returned to Australia, but argued strongly against that and eventually was able to rejoin his unit.

On 7/8 December 1941 Japan invaded Hong Kong, Malaya and Thailand. She bombed Pearl Harbour, The Philippines and Guam. World War 2 had finally come to Asia and the Pacific. By the end of the month, the two British capital battleships, "Repulse" and "Prince of Wales" had been sunk and an attack on Burma had been launched from Thailand. Japan was now master of South East Asia and the Pacific. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) moved quickly down the Malayan Peninsula, meeting only occasional setbacks from the defending forces. By 31 January Malaya had been captured and siege was laid to Singapore Island. After heavy bombing from the air and intense fighting Singapore fell to the IJA. General Percival surrendered to the Japanese Commander on 15 February 1942. Further victories were won by the Japanese; a mixed Allied Naval Force was defeated in the Java Sea leaving the Japanese Navy unchallenged in all of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In March HMAS Perth and USS Houston were sunk in the Sunda Strait, next the IJA invaded Java and shortly thereafter their campaign in Burma was successful when they captured the capital Rangoon. They invaded New Guinea and in an unrelated event the Dutch forces in the Java surrendered. In April, American and Filipino forces surrendered at Bataan and in May all British forces fell back from Burma to India.

Much has been written about the fall of Malaya and Singapore. Some have said that the allied forces, though large in numbers, were ill equipped, unused to jungle warfare and lead by officers who only thought about positional fighting, there was no air cover. By contrast their enemy had prepared for this battle for many years. They had adequately trained highly mobile troops together with naval and air support that was largely unchallenged. Winston Churchill described the fall of Singapore as "...the greatest disaster ever to have befallen the British Empire."

The fighting was over as 100,000 British, Indian and Australian troops became Prisoners of War (POWs) of the Japanese mainly on the island of Singapore. It was only 20 months since Jack had enlisted in the AIF and 1 year and 11 days since he, as a member of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the AIF, had sailed through the heads of Sydney Harbour.



## **Prisoner of War**

Neither the Japanese nor British Commands ever considered that there would be such a large number of Prisoners of War held on Singapore Island. A few days after the surrender, about 15/16<sup>th</sup> February 1942, all troops were marched from Singapore to Changi only taking the belongings that they were able to carry. Most were billeted in or near Selarang Barracks, the former base for the Gordon Highlanders. They were not initially put into Changi Gaol as this was reserved, in the early stages of the occupation, for civilian prisoners. The different segments of the soldiers were still kept within their own command structures, ie for British, Indian and Australian forces. Lieutenant Colonel F G (Black Jack) Gallegan was OIC for all Australian troops. In March the POWs were put to work under Japanese supervision on the docks, in warehouses and other building and clearing projects on the island.

Somehow or another, Jack and his mate, Pat Bond, were used as drivers and often visited the waterfront. They hoped to be able to get a boat and using some of the petrol in the vehicle and escape from Singapore, but in the end this did not eventuate.

There are many stories about life in the POW camps in Singapore. They tell about the improvisation of the troops and their efforts of going through the "wire" at night to get food and other items from the nearby villages. No doubt Jack was involved in these activities as well as "souveniring" items that he and his mates may have come across whilst working for the Japanese. Always the priority was to find food to supplement their meagre rations.

One significant event that is mentioned in many accounts of POW life was when the IJA demanded that all POWs sign a form stating that they would not attempt to escape under any circumstances. The army leadership refused to sign the statements or allow their troops to sign. The Japanese commanders then brought all POWs into the Selarang Barracks and refused to supply them with food or water until they agreed to sign. More than 15,000 men were crowded into an area that was meant to house about 1,500 troops. Dysentery became a problem due to the lack of water and toilet facilities, a number of men died. After 4 or 5 days of this stand off the men were asked to vote as to whether they should sign the paper. The majority felt they were under duress and signed and the confrontation was over.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to the POWs the IJA was going ahead with its 1939 pre-war plan of building a rail link between Thailand and Burma. This was to enable the IJA to safely supply its forces in Burma as a stage towards planning an attack on India. The decision was made in March 1942 to begin preparations for work. Following the battle of Midway, when the Japanese Navy suffered a major defeat, it was finally agreed to begin construction of the railway in June 1942. The aim was to have the railway operational by October 1943. It was to be built without the use of heavy machinery relying instead on human labour. The IJA planned to use both POWs and local Labourers under the direction of its Railway Regiments as the workforce.

A group of British POWs from Singapore was sent to Thailand to Non Pladuk (near Ban Pong the railway junction for the Singapore – Thailand railway) to commence work in preparation for building the railway. They commenced work in June 1942. At the same time other groups, mainly British and Australians were shipped to Burma to commence work at Thanbyuzayat the other end of the proposed line on the existing Ye – Moulmein railway. In the initial stages mostly British and Dutch prisoners worked on the Thailand section of the railway, with a mixture of mainly of Dutch and Australians with a small number of British and Americans working on the Burma section. As well an untold number of Asian people were “conscripted to work on the railway”; some suggest they numbered about 200,000 people.

Initially the Japanese thought they had sufficient labour available to complete the work, but by March 1943 the order came to speed up the work and conscript more labourers. Three more groups were sent to the line. “D Force” consisting of 5,000 British and Australians from Singapore and 2,000 Dutch from Java. They worked between Wang Pho and Kinsaiyok. By this time all the fit men from Changi had been sent to the line, so the IJA deliberately told the Camp Commanders that food supplies were getting short in Singapore and they needed to send men to Thailand where there was no heavy work, food was in abundance, hospitals were available and the climate would be for the better well being of the men. “F Force” was assembled comprising of 7,000 men in almost equal numbers of British and Australian POWs. Jack was one of the members of this group. They worked in the Thailand area adjacent to the border with Burma. Finally “H Force” consisting of the remaining “fit 3,000 men” from Changi and Java was sent up the line, they worked in the Konyu cutting (Hellfire Pass) area.

“F Force” suffered the heaviest casualties on the railway. The men were not “fit” before leaving Changi. The British suffered a higher death rate than the Australians, as proportionately more of their troops were classified as “unfit”, many being taken out of hospital to make up numbers, before leaving Singapore. Added to these factors, the troops were not given their full inoculations before departure. Then in Thailand they marched into the monsoon season and worked and lived in camps where there was inadequate food, bad sanitation, and virtually no medical supplies for the medical staff to use. The brutal conditions under which the men worked militated against their chances of avoiding sickness, disease, injury and survival.

## **The Last Seven Months - April 1943 to November 1943**

All groups sent from Singapore to Thailand travelled by train to Ban Pong station. They journeyed in steel box cars approximately 7 metres long and 3.5 metres wide, with 28 to 30 men in each carriage. Each trainload carried about 600 men and took five days to complete the journey. They had only a few stops en route for ablutions with food being almost non-existent. "F Force" was sent in 13 trains from Singapore to Thailand commencing on 16<sup>th</sup> April. One train was sent each day, with the last one leaving Singapore on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1943. The Australians were in the first 6 trains, ie they left between 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> April. When they arrived in Thailand, dysentery was rife and many became so sick that they were hardly able to travel further. The billeting facilities in Ban Pong were abysmal further exacerbating the health of the men.

Upon arrival each trainload of men was told that they would have to march to its worksite further up the line taking their cooking gear and only what was necessary for each man to carry. They marched up to 300kms, a journey, which according to the records of Major Bruce Hunt, a medical officer accompanying the force, took them 17 days to complete. The only concession permitted by the Japanese was to allow them to travel at night to avoid the heat of the day. They covered 25 to 30 kms each night with extra rest days every 4 or 5 days. At first the marching was along a well formed sealed road, it then deteriorated into a dirt road and then finally into nothing but a very rough bush track through the mainly uninhabited jungle. This track was to be used both as a service "road" for the railway line and the route that the IJA troops used in its attack on Burma. For the earlier trainloads of "F Force" from Singapore, a good deal of the journey was covered before the monsoonal rains set in, but for the later trains the whole journey was undertaken in the raining season, when the track deteriorated into a quagmire and the men were often knee deep in mud. "F Force" worked at the following camps, Shimo Ni Thea, Ni Thea (HQ Camp), Shimo Songkurai, Songkurai, Kami Songkurai and Changaraya, the camp nearest the Burmese border.

We do not know as yet which train Jack was on, but we do know that he had to march a distance of 299 kms from the disembarkation point to Kami Songkurai (Upper Songkurai) the second last work camp that "F Force" occupied. Whether he was on an earlier train or a later one, the reality was that his journey in the rain for the last section of that terribly wet April and May was one in which he and all the men with him were forced to travel in knee deep mud all night and then to sleep in the rain during the day. They arrived at the camp, exhausted and in much worse condition than when they started their journey.

Kami Songkurai camp as described by J F Hardacre, an "F Force" survivor was "at the foot of three steep hills which formed a rough semicircle, enclosing the camp at the rear. The area between the huts and the river formed a valley, low lying and swampy. The river flowed parallel to and about 200 metres from the road, which ran along the foot of another range of hills. During the wet season this became a filthy quagmire of green slimy mud, a great breeding ground for the malarial mosquitoes. No effort was made to



drain the area before establishing the camp. The main water supply was from a well which became fouled by refuse being washed into it and contaminated by soakage. Two springs in the hills which later dried up, plus a small creek which became a veritable trickle in dry weather made up the total water supply. The river was too far away to draw water for cooking and for ablutions. To make life more difficult, the Japs placed the river out of bounds." The camp straddled the road along which the men had marched to reach their work camp.

Initially there were only 400 Australians plus Asian labourers at this camp. Their task was to build a supply road and to commence work on constructing a railway embankment above the river level. With the rainy season now in full swing, the whole area became a sodden mud filled morass. Whilst the Australians had the advantage of a staff doctor with them (he later contracted cholera), the great number of Asian labourers did not. In practical terms this meant that there was no hygiene regime amongst the Asians, their toilets overflowed and fouled the whole area. Such was the terrain that virtually the camp was placed into the middle of a huge drain into which washed all the faeces and other health hazard materials that came from a large number of men living in a narrow space.



"F Force" camp at Kami Songkurai (in the dry season). View from the creek towards the bluff - it was uninhabited jungle in Jack's day

The whole of "F Force" whilst making this difficult journey to their work camps had rested at Konkoita (cholera hill) for a day, just about 15-20 kms south of their initial HQ camp at Shimo Ni Thea. Cholera was rife at this resting point. It is thought that the disease has a five day incubation period. At Shimo Ni Thea five days later the first Australian died of cholera, two days later another Australian died at Kami Songkurai (Jack's camp) and two days after that many died at Shimo Songkurai, the largest of the Australian "F Force" working camps. Cholera struck the British troops who were on the last of the trains from Singapore by the number of days later that they were behind the Australians on the march. Within two months 500 men had died from the disease. "F Force" never recovered from that devastating start to their time in Thailand. Sickness and disease almost wiped out the whole of the force. The British eventually lost 61% of their number and the Australians 28% of their men, in all 3,000 members of the original 7,000 strong force died as a result of the disease and the conditions under which they lived and slaved.



Because the "F Force" camps were so far from the start of the line on the Thailand side and the men were working in the monsoon rains, the track along which they marched, became impassable during this season. This track was their supply route but vehicles were unable to negotiate it during the monsoon period. So men had to march back and back pack the supplies to camp. The result was that food was in short supply all of the time. Added to this the daily ration of food of mainly weevilly rice, which was allocated to each person, was grossly inadequate to enable the men to be able to work with strength, resist sicknesses and have much chance of survival under their work conditions. Also, the Japanese Camp Commander refused to allocate food to those in hospital in the belief that this would urge them to recover more quickly and be able to return to the workforce. Fortunately, the working men made sure that the daily rice and other food items sent to the kitchen was divided up amongst both the working and the hospitalised men. The men were living on a downward spiral that sapped their strength and will to survive. Finally, the Japanese Camp Commander and his Korean guards were particularly brutal at this camp. Following the end of the war they were tried and sentenced for War Crimes based on how they had treated the prisoners at Kami Songkurai.



"F Force" Camp at Kami Songkurai (in the dry season).  
View from the river.

This was the situation in which Jack worked every day whether on the railway or maintaining the road. We know that at least one other man from his unit was also in the camp, Pte Ernest Harold McBurney from Marrickville in Sydney also belonged to the 2/73 LAD. Unfortunately he died on 17 September, he was 26 years old. There were also



men from the Signallers in this camp, so perhaps he had friends with him that he known since he had come to Malaya.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> August Jack had his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday; no doubt there was no celebration over such an occasion as the men who were able to work were out all day in the most appalling rainy conditions. As well early in August 1943 many of the Australians who were based at Shimo Songkurai and the British who had been working at Changaraya and Songkurai were moved to Kami Songkurai. The camp which was in a very narrow part of the country was expanded from 400 men to over 5,000 in that period. This exacerbated the health and hygiene situation. It was a crowded muddy mess open to disease and sickness as never before. Everyone was living in the most cramped conditions, with the Japanese Commander, refusing to allow the Australians and the British to have a joint hospital or other daily combined functions. The ever present Asian labourers were succumbing to diseases including cholera and small pox.



“F Force” camp at Kami Songkurai (in the dry season).  
Walking along the remains of the railway bed.

The push was on to finish the railway. The railway bed was rising and joining up with the completed sections from the south and the north. Then on 17<sup>th</sup> September the Track Layers from Burma came through Kami Songkurai and headed south, the railway line was being laid. There was a week's delay in the track laying due to a cutting collapse at Songkurai to the south. But the Thailand and Burma sections were finally joined at Konkoita on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1943. Work began to ease off and with the rail open food supplies began to improve a little and the men felt the pressure was off.



However at Kami Songkurai a new difficulty arose. The railway lines had to be packed with ballast. To provide the stone for this task, the Japanese decided to develop a quarry in the hills adjacent to the camp. The railway engineers began blasting the rock face and this resulted in showers of rock flying into the camp and often into the hospital wards where the ill and dying lay.

Soon the rumour came that the men would be evacuated by train and sent back down the line to Kanchanaburi. Stan Arneil in his book, "One Man's War", records how this rumour began in early to mid October. It buoyed up the hopes of many of the sick and dying who being aware that the railway was working and their job was done, hung on in the hope that they would get out alive. But it was a month later on 19<sup>th</sup> November that the men began to move out for the journey back to Kanchanaburi and hopefully through to Singapore. Many of the sick and dying had given up hope and the deaths in this terrible camp continued right until the very end.

Jack, like all the men, was physically weakened. He had ulcers on his legs from working, possibly without boots on the railway in the muddy conditions. The puss filled ulcers caused by scratches became virulent in tropical conditions and ate into the skin and even the muscles and tendons. They were painful and their treatment under camp conditions was agonising for both the patient and the medical staff. He contracted berri berri, a vitamin B1 deficiency disease that paralysed the extremities and caused the body to swell up enormously. It was prevalent when the diet consisted mainly of polished rice. Men with feet like balloons were forced to go and work on the railway. An almost fatal variant of the disease was cardiac beri beri. He was hospitalised and under treatment for these diseases. He then contracted pneumonia. On 18<sup>th</sup> November 1943, the day before the first troops left the camp to journey south and back to Singapore he died. The railway that saved the survivors of "F Force" was finished too late to save him. He was 44 years and 3 months old when he died.

The rains continued and Jack, along with others who had died that day, were cremated and buried in the Camp Cemetery underneath the lee of the bluff that dominates the site of Kami Songkurai. The burial parties were so weakened physically that they buried Jack and one other soldier in the same grave in that forsaken place.



## Re-Burial in Burma

Both "F Force" and the IJA kept records of the men who worked in the camps and of those who died. Fortunately the IJA respected those who had died and although not necessarily encouraging their memorialisation, did allow the establishment and care of camp cemeteries. Almost two years after Jack's death, on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945, the Japanese surrendered and VJ Day (Victory over Japan Day) was celebrated. In early September members of the British, Dutch and Australian War Graves Services assembled in Thailand. One of these men was the British Padre H C Babb who kept a diary of the team that was sent to record details of the Cemeteries that had been established along the whole of the railway line. They started on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September at Thanbyuzayat Cemetery then 2 days later left in a truck railway motor (a so called "flying Kampong") and accompanied by a steam train carrying their supplies, journeyed along the 415kms of the railway line. They stopped at all the former camps identifying and recording the details of the burials in each cemetery. The Japanese troops who were still in these areas were ordered to maintain and look after the graves, which they willingly did. On 24<sup>th</sup> October they arrived at Nakhon Pathom having visited 144 cemeteries and identified 10,549 graves. Only 52 of the graves that they were searching for were not identified.

The decision was taken to establish three War Cemeteries, two in Thailand and one in Burma. All the remains from the graves in the camp cemeteries from Ni Thea to Thanbyuzayat were to be re-buried in the War Cemetery established at Thanbyuzayat. It was the original camp cemetery for the beginning point of the railway line in Burma.



Entrance gates to Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery Myanmar (Burma)

Thus all those from "F Force" who had died in upper Thailand and across the border in Burma, were reburied in the new cemetery being established at the end of the Thai-



Burma Railway line. All others were reburied in the War Cemeteries at Kanchanburi and Chungkai near the Kwae Noi River. At Kami Songkurai, Jack's grave was opened and the two sets of remains buried in it were taken carefully to Burma and reburied in the Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery.



John & Keith at Jack's grave in Burma

Because the burial party could not be sure which remains were Jack's, the memorial plaque set over his grave reads "BURIED NEAR THIS SPOT". His grave number is A10. G.13. In fact every memorial plaque in the whole of Row A in the cemetery carries the same header comment of "buried near this spot". The full inscription reads:

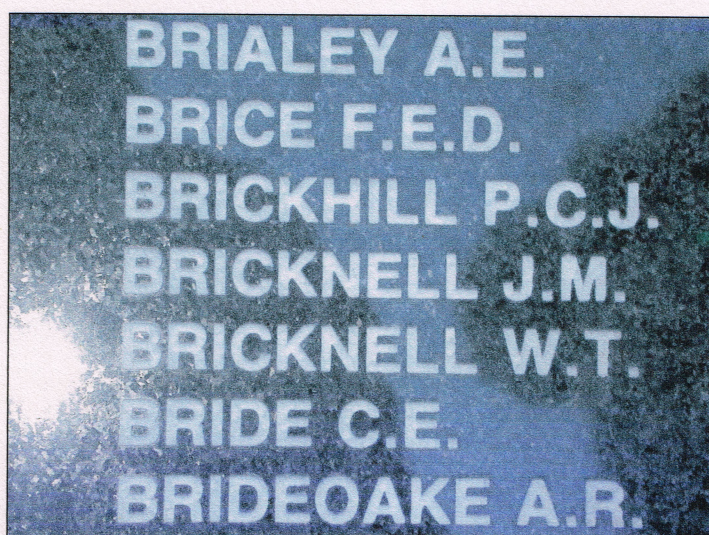
Buried Near This Spot  
NX33134 Lance Corporal  
J M BRICKNELL  
Corps of Electrical & Mechanical Engineers  
18<sup>th</sup> November 1943 Age 34  
May Light Perpetual Shine upon Him





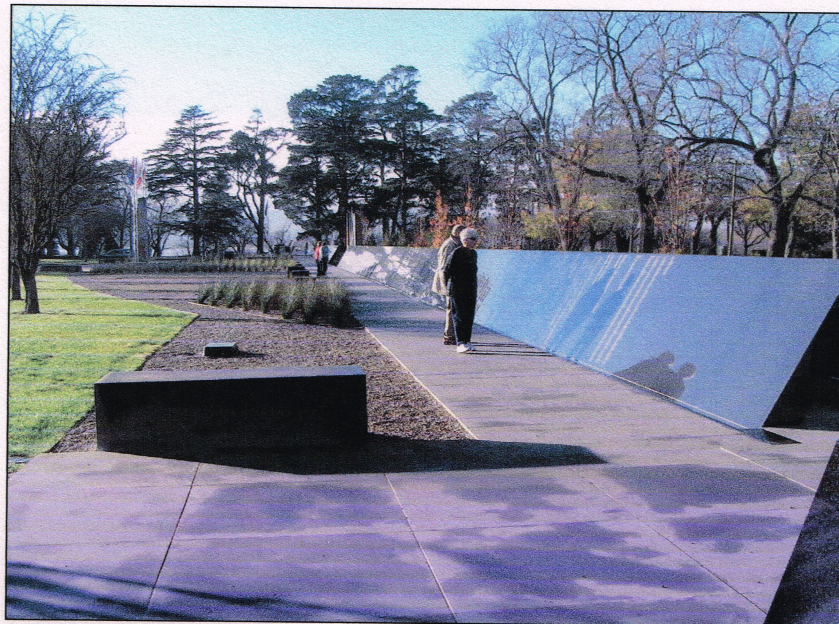
The headstone on Jack's grave in Myanmar (Burma)

There are three other memorials where Jack is listed. In the National War Memorial in Canberra he is listed under the Australian Electrical & Mechanical Engineers (of which the 2/73 LAD was a unit). He is also listed on the National Prisoners of War Memorial in Ballarat, Victoria.



Jack's' inscription on the National POW Memorial





**National Prisoners of War Memorial Ballarat Victoria**

The other place is on the War Memorial Gates at Lakeside Avenue, Eastwood. This is the district war memorial for the people of that suburb.

Posthumously Jack was awarded the following medals:



**1939-45 Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal,  
War Medal and the Australian Service Medal.**



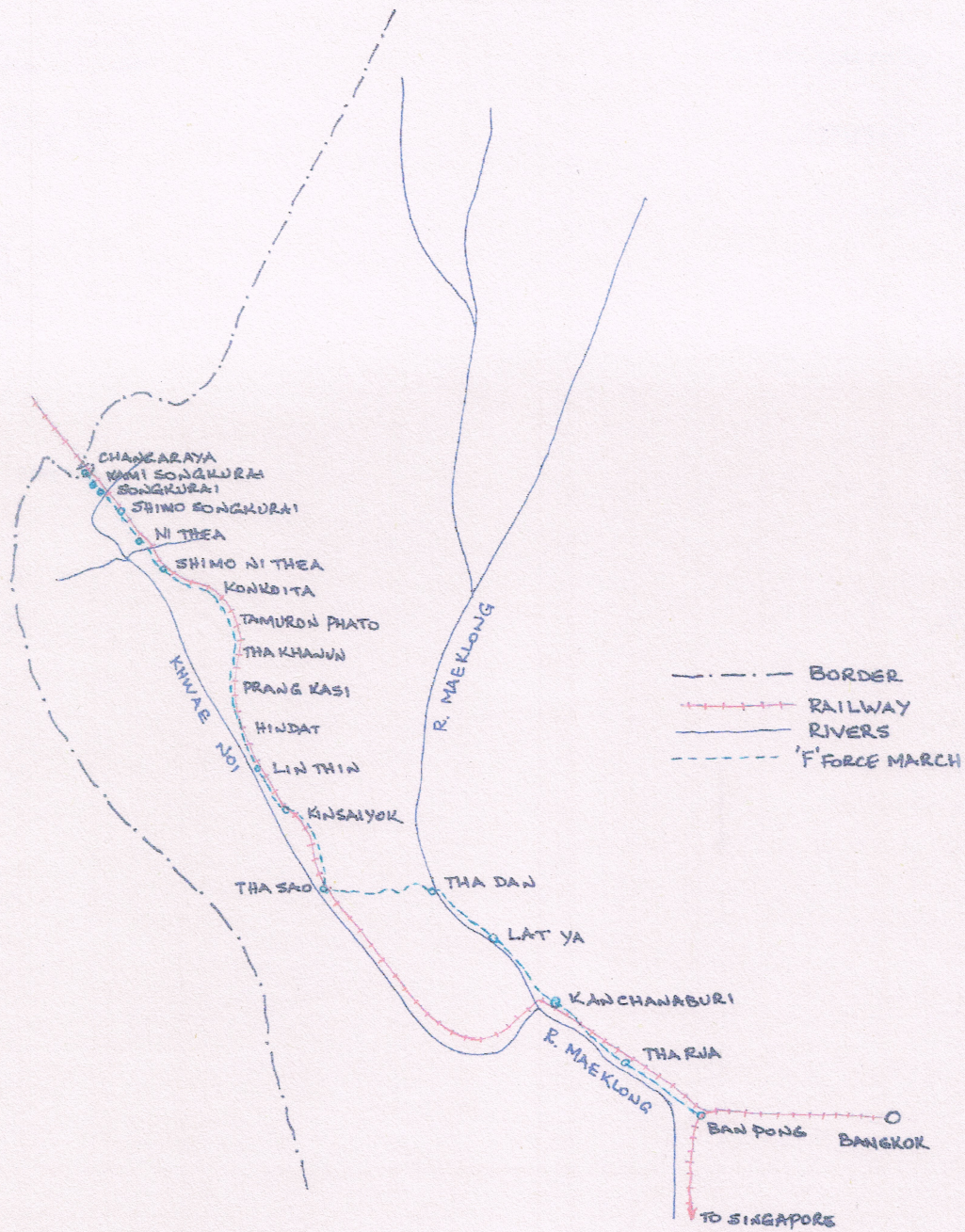
Word of his death was not received by his family until then end of World War 2. His widow, Sylvia Bricknell was granted a War Widows Pension.

For many years after the end of the war on the 18<sup>th</sup> November, the anniversary of his death, both Sylvia and his closest army friend, "Pat" J W Bond, used the memorial notices in the Sydney Morning Herald to remember his life and death.

He was gone, but not forgotten.



# 'F' Force route of march





## Members of the 2/73 Light Aid Detachment of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division Australian Imperial Force

### From New South Wales

Captain	Noel Arthur Hill	NX70185	Discharged	17.12.1945
WO2	Robert John Purdy	NX54545	Discharged	15.2.1946
L/Cpl	John Martyn Bricknell	NX33134	Died	18.11.1943
L/Cpl	Reuben Coupe	NX56960	Discharged	18.1.1946
Pte	John William Bond	NX30798	Discharged	30.11.1945
Pte	Ronald Frederick Kearsley	NX58618	Discharged	16.1.1946
Pte	Ernest Harold McBurney	NX65377	Died	17.9.1943
Pte	William Radford Kennedy Papworth	NX65379	Discharged	12.6.1946

### From Victoria

Sgt	George Colin Collinson Maxfield*	VX32710	Died	15.9.1944
Signalman	Robert Henry Arrowsmith	VX54867	Discharged	19.12.1945
Craftsman	Gordon Henry Bartils *	VX54880	Died	21.6.1945
Pte	Clement Burdett*	VX63291	Discharged	8.3.1946
Pte	Stanley Bilings Clarke	VX59141	Discharged	20.12.1945

### From Western Australia

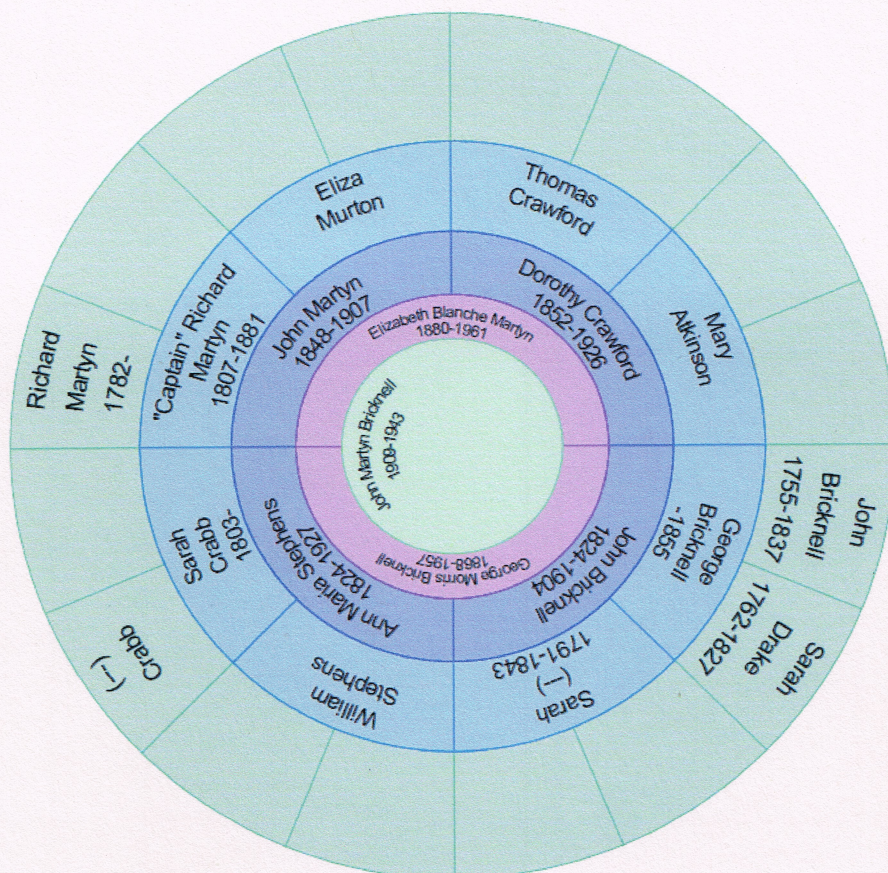
Pte	Leonard Henry Payne	WX6691	Discharged	22.11.1945
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\* These three men were Reinforcements for the unit.

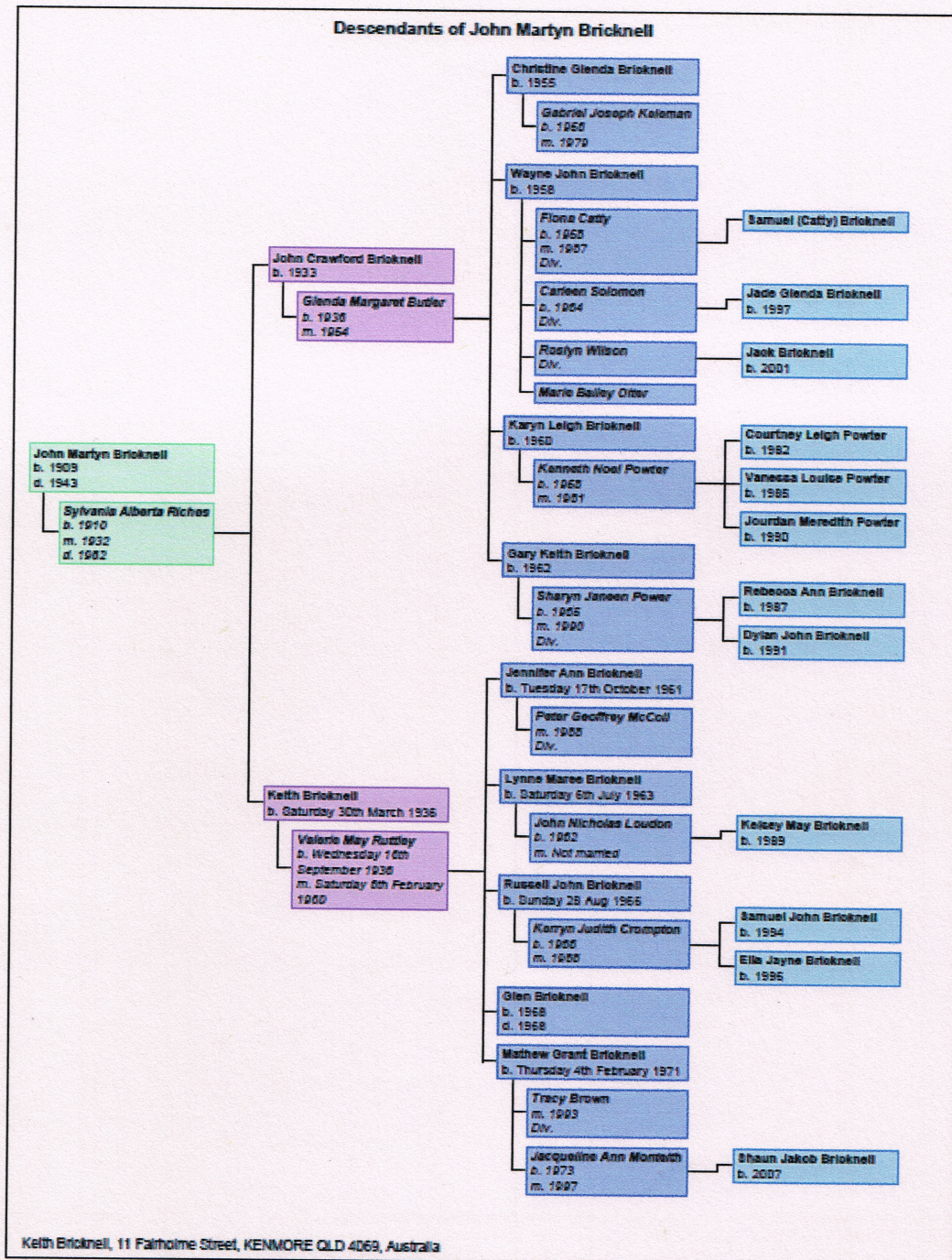
It is noted that the oldest member was born in 1900 and the youngest in 1918, giving an age range of 32 to 40 years when the unit was formed in 1940.



## Ancestors of John Martyn Bricknell









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Also used were general websites belonging to The Thailand Burma Railway Centre Museum (Kanchanaburi); The Thailand Burma Railway Memorial Associations in the UK and WA.



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